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Meta Praxis

Craft Practice: A Way of Being

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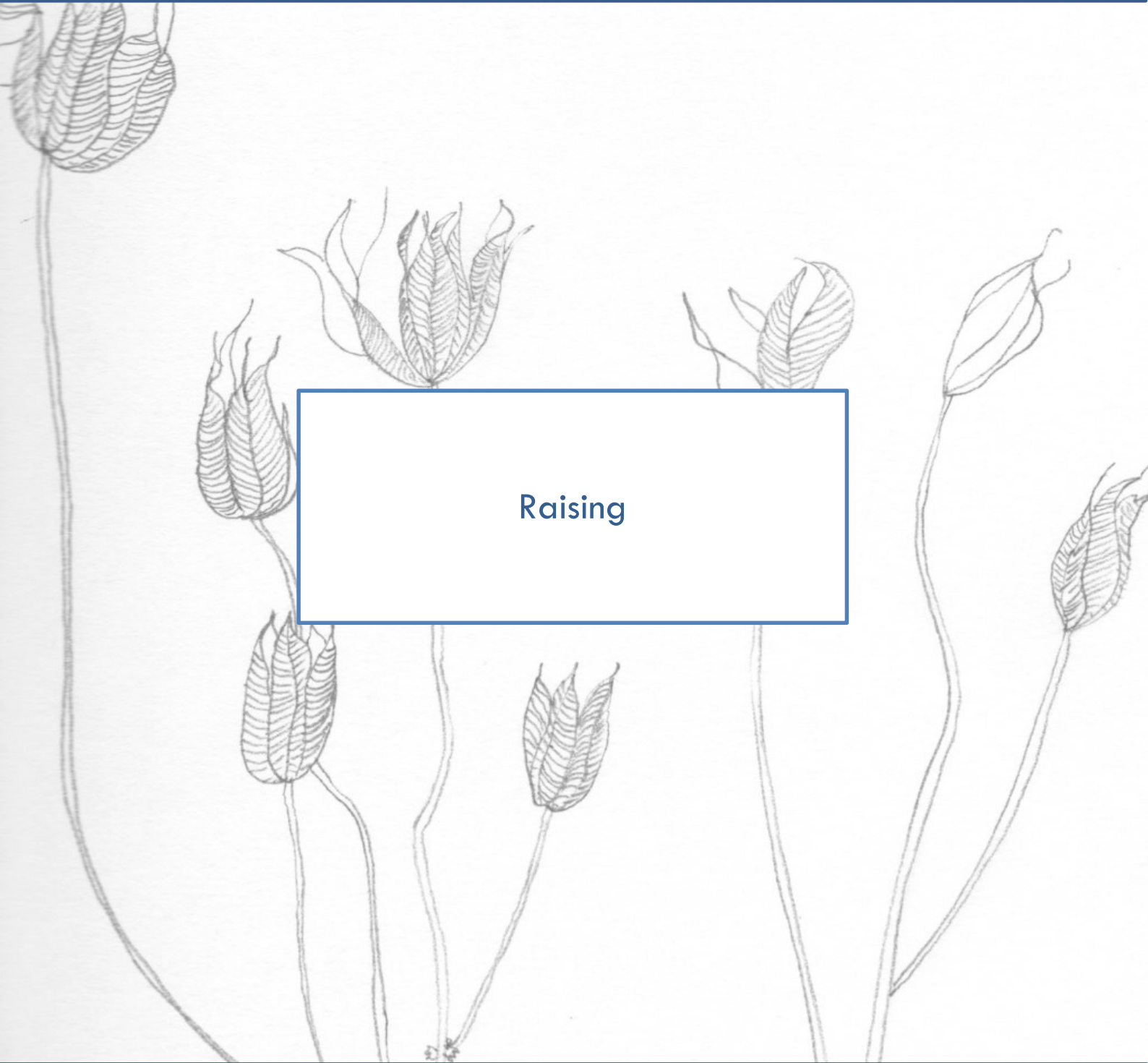
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Raising

Irene Orr
META PRAXIS

Empty

Seeds ready to caress
though the air

Sow

Settling, nesting, burrowing
Storing stories whose telling will
Whisper truths and imaginations
To nurture us

Hold them
In vessels with hammer marks so
Minute
The light tings and
Wavers

To resonate over and over

Reaping, flourishing, rotating
Making so we can all hear
The rhythms of our finger tips
Sounds of blossoming

Raising

'The difference between a dink and a donk'. A master silversmith, when asked to explain his craft, delivered this description. His skill was such that he was able to hammer out a perfectly flat plate, talk, laugh and tell jokes whilst seemingly not thinking, but clearly totally in touch with his task. Learning the difference between a dink and a donk, however, is perhaps a way of explanation to the learned skills accessed only through doing, by directly, actively engaging with practice.

I had long wanted to explore silversmithing, particularly as it seems to me to embody all the elements of a making practice amplified to study.

The larger scale: intimate use of specific tools for precise actions; its core intention to make a product fit for purpose; and the explicit interconnections of all our sensory pathways seem to have a purity I can examine.

My nervous system is there to process information. Its use of sensory receptors, leading towards the neural pathways activate the brains functions.

The living systems generally recognised are vision, (seeing) hearing (auditory), somatic sensation (touch), gustatory (taste), olfaction (smell) and vestibular (balance/ movement). My senses are the transducers from a physical world to the realm of the mind, where I interpret information, creating a personal perception of the world.

I have directly read many manuals detailing methods of raising silver (the technique of shaping metal into a three-dimensional shape, from sheet metal) none of which comes close to knowing the embodied nature of blocking (first shaping of the metal in a hollowed wooden block), raising, watching the 'bow wave' (literally the wave of metal that occurs during hammering that moves the material through its malleability raising it to form a new shape), the travel, movement, and the measuring of the silver thickening. The smell of annealing metal, watching the colour change, black heat, cherry red, dull red, all indicating temperature changes, the taste of the heat, and the flame from the furnace as it produces its critical temperature. The sound of the quench (the rapid cooling of metal in water). Seeing, touching and smelling all contribute to knowing the sequences, tolerances and accomplishment of this task. Nothing prepares one for the balances, for the pure physicality required to raise those 'bow waves'. The action that is implemented by a specific hammer, nylon, box wood or another metal, onto the metal after it has been blocked.

'Blocking' (first forming, using the softer more forgiving wooden block to give a purchase for the next raising on metal stakes) gives the first 'course' of a curve to the piece, enabling the next steps of holding the circular piece of metal over a chosen stake, possible. Hitting the metal with the right action of hammer blow, pushing the metal upwards (raising) against the correct curvature of the correctly chosen stake creates a natural wave, which rises each round 'course' of hammering

one follows. The process appraises the practice; if a hammer blow misses the precise spot or the stake is too far from the piece, the craft person soon adjusts their position, their balance, their aim, until precision is consistent. Each moment revises the next, the 'encounter' in all sensory dimensions informs the crucial knowledge required for attaining the skills which are meshed together, an integrated practiced performance that produces the desired, calculated result. Whether exact measurement, or experiment, are paramount, whether narrative or form is the desired outcome, the amalgam of our senses attuned to physical skills is critical to our empirical calculations and result.

It is a proficiency of balance of concentration, intellect and co-ordination through fingertips and tools, tolerances, eyes, an alert relaxed quintessence of skill, as if riding a thoroughbred horse whose body recognises every tension, message and command the rider transmits. It is a language; not just of words or linguistics but an immersive experiential communication, whereby an entire knowledge pathway is ignited and realised.

Hammering: an essential technique used in raising, hammering requires a depth of information regarding shape, weight, texture and material of the tool, an awareness built on practice towards proficiency, teachings (most successfully through mentoring, showing by another practitioner who has more experience), trial and error, and observation to choose the correct stake for the exact movement of the metal. The balance required strikes the hammer in the specific point of contact, using the physics of the 'blow' to conserve muscle power, dynamism and stamina. Where and how the handle of the hammer rests in your hand, the contours personally adapted by the crafts person, the palm, the arc of the action, the hand to eye co-ordination and the sound. The sound of boxwood, nylon or steel, on copper or silver, against wood blocks or steel stakes, all have a unique auditory quality.

The sound of metal against metal: the sound of metal against air.
'The difference between a dink and a donk.'

To raise: metal on air is required at an exact angle to move the metal into the space carefully positioned between the object and the stake.
To planish: metal on metal is required to ease out discrepancies and polish, or texture, the finish.

Each tool, each action, each process engaging and awakening a sensory flow, an immersive set of actions integrated with thoughts that can only be truly learned by doing.

This embodied action has a unique quality; one that I cannot find language to embrace sufficiently.

Professor Sandra Wilson, at Dundee University, personal mentor and fellow Hammer Club member, recently traversed the question of scholarly knowledge alongside embodied knowledge in an article to distinguish the different methods of raising (Dutch Raising, angle

raising, stretching and creasing) within silversmithing, often implied amongst silversmiths but not specifically defined in academia.

“Ultimately a practice seeks embodied knowledge and does not ascribe names or titles or techniques. Embodied knowledge is built up over time with repeated actions, and habits until the body knows how to act and lives the practice. Embodied knowledge also has lineage, where techniques have been passed on from one practitioner to the next through generations. Within academia a priori and a posteriori knowledge are emphasized. A priori can be considered as knowledge that is independent of experience for example as in mathematics and is based on pure reason and posteriori which depends on experience as in particular empirical evidence.

Academic knowledge, therefore is, largely based on the reasoning of the mind and is written down. Traditionally silversmithing techniques are not written down, perhaps because it is very difficult to translate the knowledge of the body into the knowledge of the mind.

These different types of knowledge however should not be viewed in competition with each other but rather seen as complimentary and mutually enhancing.”¹

The actions of embodied knowledge lead to a depth of comprehension rooted in participation, a faculty of perception, and a confluence of these finely tuned elements, which provide the platform for unique, new, deep, observational and practice-led knowledge to emerge. It is a learned technique, not information or data to be retrieved at will, but one that comes from within, intimacy, the language of making.

Interestingly, whilst researching for words that embrace my description of embodied action, senses and cognition, I found we have more direct language for actions, leaving the nuance of the senses wanting.

In Buddhism, there are two words in Sanskrit more exacting and broader reaching in describing the sense sphere. Ayatana (field of cognition) and sadayatana (the six senses based on internal and external pairing). Crucially, the sixth sense is Mind and Mental Object, as opposed to the western centric version of the five senses, absent of the mind as a sense. Sadayatana comprise of:

Eye and Visual Object
Ear and Sound
Nose and Odour
Tongue and Taste
Body and Touch
Mind and Mental Object

The mind is not a separate entity of cognition, interpreting the senses; it is a sense itself and is an interconnected property of the world.

¹ Wilson, 2018

The research also makes the direct connection to Francisco J. Varela (1946-2001) who was Director of the Centre National de Recherche Scientifique, Professor of Cognitive Science and Epistemology, CREA, at the Ecole Polytechnique, Paris, and Co-founder of the Mind and Life Institute. In *"The Embodied Mind"*, Varela was one of the first to propose an "embodied cognition" approach in cognitive science. His work pioneered the connections between phenomenology, the science of phenomena as distinct from that of the nature of being, and pure science and between Buddhist practices and science. Varela studied with Chogyam Trungpa (founder of Samye Ling Monastery Scotland and instigated 'The Mind and Life Institute' bringing Buddhism and Science together.

*"By embodied, we mean reflection in which body and mind have been brought together. What this formation intends to convey is that reflection is not just an experience, but reflection is a form of experience itself-and that reflective form of experience can be performed with mindfulness/awareness."*²

'Meta Praxis': Beyond practice, a plethora of explicit, attributable actions, senses, emotions and creative abilities, an ontological way of being which sets our distinctiveness and a connector to the vitality of life itself, is my description of this embodied practice accessible through the practice of making.

*"Let us explain what we mean by this phrase embodied action. By using the term embodied we mean to highlight two points: first, that cognition depends upon the kinds of experience that come from having a body with various sensorimotor capacities, and second, that these individual sensorimotor capacities are themselves embedded in a more encompassing biological, psychological, and cultural context. By using the term action, we mean to emphasize once again that sensory and motor processes, perception and action, are fundamentally inseparable in lived cognition. Indeed, the two are not merely contingently linked in individuals; they have also evolved together."*³

Silver, surprisingly, is a forgiving material, as it can be hammered, folded, annealed, alloyed, melted, burnished, planished, to name just a few techniques. Any number of shapes, vessels and containers can be formed.

It can be manipulated with precision, with the potential to evolve into useful objects of aesthetic quality, function, artistry and desirability. During my time teaching metalwork and jewellery at undergraduate level, it was always a source of incredulity to have several students embark upon the same project brief to be astounded by them producing work that had no identical twin. The uniqueness of each individual convergence formulating their own 'hallmark' and personality in the work.

² Varela *et al.*, 1993, p. 27

³ *Ibid.*, p. 173

A hand-raised bowl given exact dimensions will still carry individual 'marks' identifying the maker.

Clearly, mechanical production methods have an ability to erase this phenomenon for the purposes of mass production, unity in style and shape, equally erasing several characteristics in the 'Meta' specifically identified within the individual maker. Whilst production methods can save time and produce multiple, exact products, to be skilful and creative, it requires a deep understanding of the hand, tool and mind, through an embodied making practice to develop into this arena. A 3D printer needs to be programmed by someone who knows how the product will look, feel and work. It may lose the physicality of the hand, mind and tool, but it can still envelop skill, narrative, creativity and function.

Skills and knowledge, adequate to achieve a desired result, are time-consuming, physically demanding, a process of constant reaffirmation of the equilibrium between embodied senses, materials and tools. It is an insistent skill, its own teacher, exercising and relentlessly fine-tuning personal proficiencies. The value of this ability to connect through, and into, our essential, vital, embodied cognition is the sense of becoming one with the work, integrated with a sense of being.

The preciousness of my material choice has a bearing on an attitude towards the work; it adds another dimension and an acute focus on avoiding mistakes and has the ability to sharpen attention. The technicalities of raising a bowl are written in numerous manuals, papers and handouts. Words and diagrams can go some way to a description of process. Written accounts and images can engage with the intellect, but the embodiment of all the process of practice, come though not the intellect alone, but through the magic, the engagement of the 'Meta Praxis', which is the actuality of growth in knowledge by doing, feeling, embracing and shaping my development and progression. It is like a language, an intimate communication, between maker, materials and object.

Take, for example, a circular piece of Britannia silver (95.8% silver), which is softer than sterling silver (92.5% silver) with the addition of slightly more fine silver. Place it onto a wooden 'block with a curved hollow appropriate to the size of your metal. By using a blocking hammer (wooden egg shaped) the first curvature or raise is created, forming a camber by which the metal can be held against a chosen metal stake, thus, giving hand, metal, stake and hammer purchase enough to move with precision to the next 'course' (a complete 'round') of raising.

It sounds easy, but just knowing the correct curvature and the tool to correctly move the metal in the right direction, without stretch, raising not flattening, are all skills learned (feeling, seeing, hearing) by connecting to my intellect as a sensory pathway to knowledge.

The stake must be smaller than the curve required, with the silver held accurately against the stake on just the perfect angle so that the

hammer blow moves the silver directly into the 'space' created behind the metal onto the stake. This action pushes the metal up and, with rhythmic, methodical and accurate hammer blows following a concentric pencil line around the disc, magically moves the metal into a wave above the hammer blows. The next row of hammering is to move this wave, ripple by ripple up towards the circumference of the vessel. Each round of hammering, raising the metal whilst reducing the circumference of the circle with each round. The resulting circumference inevitably forms a wave of its own, a pie crust of a shape, as the metal thickens, and the diameter reduces.

It not only consumes time but my 'whole being'. Holding the hammer in the correct position to avoid blisters and aiming with accuracy avoids damage and pain from misguided direction. Constant checking of stance, holding and stability soon become innate, the practice imprinting a sensorial memory through neural receptors.

Many accomplished practitioners adjust or make their own tools. Shape, weight, metal type: the variation of work produced by the hands is personal. A hammer handle is rounded to echo the curve in the palm of the hand; a stake which is not just the perfect slope is filed to accommodate. Intimate personal engagement with this grows. A knowing, consisting of practice, process, consequence, skill and synchronisation from sensorial connectivity, forms a discovering of what occurs beyond what already is there. 'Meta Praxis'.

It is a well-known fact that the physical work of a trade, often dirty, requires either a driven incentive or a hereditary backdrop. An adventurous creative mind may seek the task and the toil of the craftsman's path; indeed, the rewards are enormous. However, time has seen an erosion of support, and many look towards new technologies, or methods of production to offset hours of toil.

The exploration of beyond, the creative mind, the physical, the narrative, giving a voice or a caress that extends to the viewer and touches us where we feel a belonging. Multi-dimensional, engaged, neural pathways, physicality, it connects us to our aliveness.

The bowl I am making grows; the rim thickens; its shape formed entirely from hammer blows. I ache. My muscles twinge. The marks made of box, nylon, metal, a thousand planished marks neatly overlapping, are a meditation on my richness of experience. An echo of form and reflection, a fine subtle finish of pumice, followed by a delicate brush to leave a lustre, all become an inscription of intention.

And so, the difference between a 'dink and a donk', the choosing or making of a right tool, the seamless interdependence between materials, tools, neural pathways and body develops and grows and, with it perhaps, so do I.

A craft practice has an ability to embrace the poiesis, praxis and techne (the poetry, the practice and the technique) through the exploration, discovery and creative journey. It starts with a humble

skill-based activity rooted in the use of materials; and, by the skilled use of tools, I can make an object with use at its core value. To wear, to decorate, to allow ease of eating and drinking, an enabler to enhance our experience of being human by keeping warm, keeping cool, attracting, moving, illuminating and nourishing.

As a by-product, I encounter skill, wellbeing, growth and identity, all of which touches, if not defines, my essential humanity.

The exceptional symbiosis of brain functions, intellect, embodied action, senses, materials and tools, informed by the steps taken through and into awareness, focus, attention and training, producing our stories, our vessels, our uniqueness, which defines culture, producing artefacts rooted in the practical, ritual and aesthetic values. All this keeps us connected and participant in practicality and intimacy. All over the world, streets are named after the 'trades' of the crafts: Silver Street, Cobbler Street; the names often relate directly to the craft of our heritage. It is a human condition to have craft as a life-enhancing endeavour.

Perhaps now, as we see craft considerably more attuned to production, economic value and commercial enterprise, it may well be worth asking the questions: What is the value of craft? What needs to happen for 'Meta Praxis' to be recognised as an essential quality for living?

Can we afford to lose touch with these attributes? As old as our existence, changing as we change, technologies enhance and science proves, but the ability to preserve the ontological craft of making must remain paramount as it connects us to our whole being.

My bowls were made with the intention of being with the process. I knew I wanted to keep the form and function pure and simple. I wanted to watch and feel the raising of the bowls. I wanted to embrace the rhythm of the hammering. I relished the planishing techniques, its repetition, its polishing in minute contact of hammer and metal points. I purposely have not marked it with the usual hallmark, only as a recognition of the ethos of the 'unknown craftsman' (a value specific to the craft and not the person, known throughout Asia as grace and phenomenon beyond the person/artist/maker).

I am not a master silversmith. These pieces were made to further reflect upon the practice to lead me to the encounters within. They are not intended to break boundaries of technique or artistry. In this process of raising I have used the concept of awareness in Buddhism, a different meaning from awareness in the West. In Buddhism Awareness, or emptiness, or the Ultimate is the natural state of everything before consciousness. It is, therefore, pure and able to be brought into cognition through well-meaning and training, to recognise the true nature of reality. The seed heads I have blowing over the empty bowls are the seeds of this raising of our conscious thoughts to bring into awareness. The name of the three bowls is Quench as a

gesture to our thirst for knowledge and the name given to metal being dipped into water after annealing.

Meta Praxis

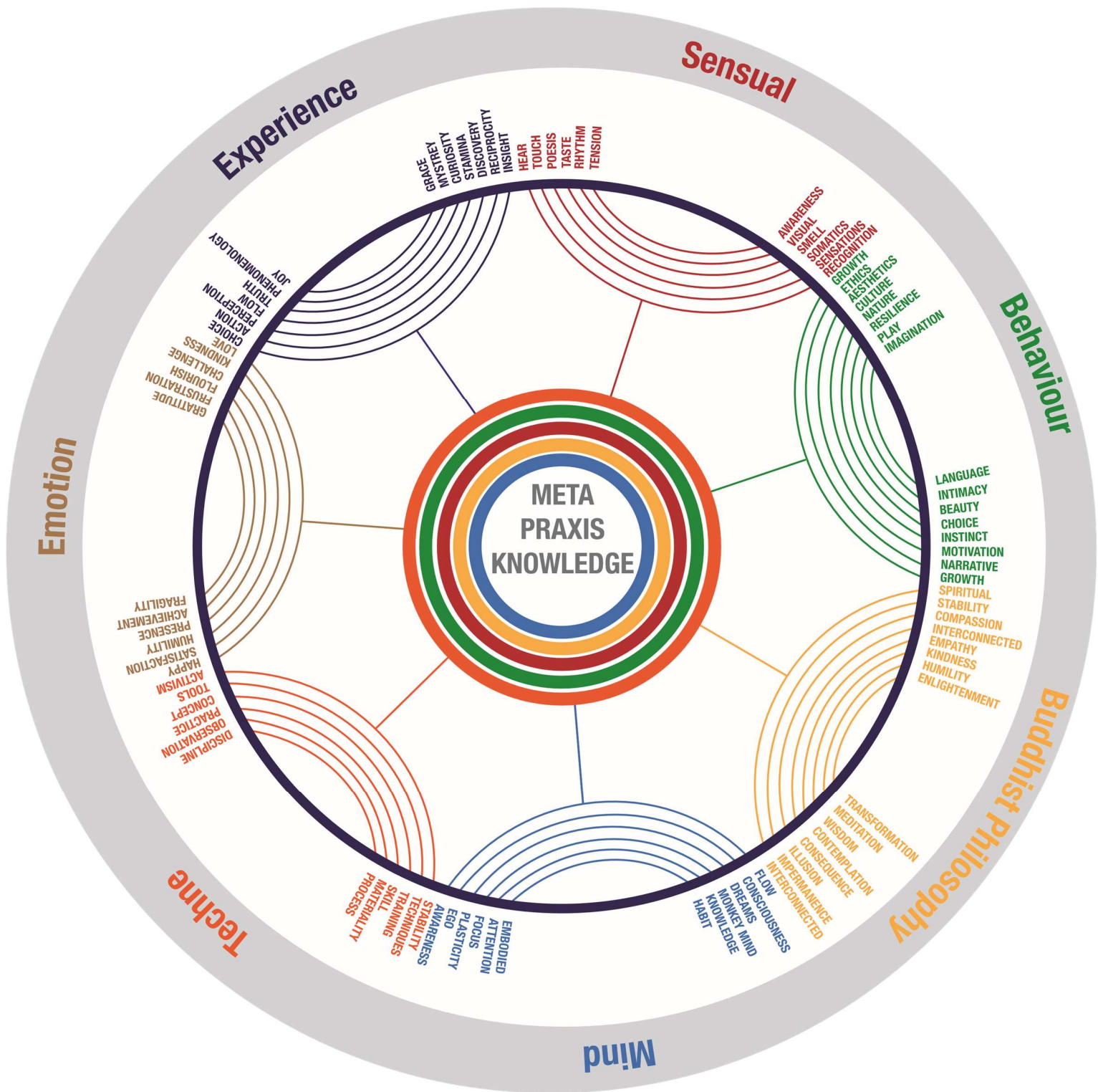
'Meta Praxis' is the potential for human flourishing through an awareness of practice and the value of making craft as an explicit knowledge pathway. Within and beyond the practice, this pathway has the potential to put us in touch with the essential vitality of life and its human value.

The exposition and articulation of 'Meta Praxis' and its potential is the original contribution to knowledge. This research leads us through interdisciplinary schools of thought (craft practice, Buddhism, anthropology, and neuroscience) to make connections and to set out why and how making craft is an explicit knowledge pathway and what is its importance for human thriving.

Chart

The chart represents possible reflections, encounters and human traits explored within the 'reflections'; each has multiple, personal and potential pathways represented in the chart. As the reader engages with the writing in each text, it is possible to explore these routes of knowledge and relate them specifically to the idea of 'Meta Praxis'.

The texts are the reflections of practice, with relevant encounters affirmed through an interdisciplinary approach.



**META PRAXIS
CRAFT PRACTICE: A WAY OF BEING**

